Leave The Kid Alone

by Stephen Gosnell

We'll go on the assumption that you want your kids literate. But do you want them literary? How would you like them to grow up to be Norman Mailer, Céline, Marcel Proust, and/or Virginia Woolf? Think about it. Literate they will be. Nearly everybody's kid survives his education. Human beings are, by and large, very resilient. And nearly everybody's kid emerges with standard anthropoid skills. George Meany, Leon Uris, Madalyn Murray, and Tony "Big Tuna" DeLuca can all read and write. Quit worrying about that.

But if you are stuffing *kinder*-lit down the throats of your progeny hoping to inculcate incipient culture, you might want to examine your motives and reassess your methods. What is reading supposed to do for kids? What are the real priorities? In our corner of Western Civilization, the average parent essentially wants three things for his children. He wants them to turn out to be Sane, Heterosexual, and Gainfully Employed. Let's face it, an abiding love for language and literature is not always a cause or concomitant of any of the above.

There's an old burlesque gag (e. e. cummings liked it, too) which goes: "Would you hit a woman with a child?" Answer: "No, I'd hit her with a brick." The point is clear: if you go around with unimaginative assumptions, you are bound to receive rude shocks. The specific purpose of reading in childhood should be to engender imaginative assumptions.

Some children's literature does this. Dr. Seuss, Spiderman comic books, and Wacky Packs come to mind. But the written word is not the only nor the most pervasive source of this enlightenment. The other night I heard my seven-year-old exclaim from the top of the stairs, "His foot odor got so bad, flames come out of his socks, and he shoots up into the air." This formidable conceit was obviously catalyzed by a happy amalgam of *The Six Million Dollar Man* and a Desenex commercial. So, scorn not the tube. I never had to go to church. I learned all my situation ethics off *Leave It to Beaver*. I'm proud of it. But a lot of the current drivel being pandered as children's literature only exhorts the child to "self-realization" and tolerance and promises him a liberated psyche and an adoring public. Talk about letting him in for rude shocks! Beware.

Kids, in some sly instinctive way, know better. They are not interested in ideas. They like puns, cruel jokes, amazing statistics, monsters, the subversion of authority, brute strength, complicated pictures, and perverse nonsense. In short, anything, no matter how veiled in metaphor, that suggests to them that they are getting a no-bullshit glimpse of the silly but dangerous universe that adults inhabit and that they will have to, bit by bit, adapt themselves to.

My ten-year-old went around for four months with a copy of the *Guinness Book of World Records* in her hand until *(Continued on page 126)*

Stephen Gosnell teaches art at the University of Missouri, Kansas City.

Letter from Europe

AUBERON WAUGH

Of cod, red herrings and bulldogs

An alarming thing has happened to the traditional bulldog spirit of the British. It emerged the day after I.R.A. gunmen shot down Ross McWhirter, coeditor and founder (with his twin brother) of the *Guinness Book of World Records*, outside the front door of his suburban home near London. His crime was apparently to have supported restoration of the death penalty for murders in the furtherance of political terrorism.

The whole of Britain was shocked by this murder, partly because McWhirter was a popular figure on television and partly because it seemed to cast a certain constraint on public debate. The *Guinness Book of World Records* has established itself in twenty years as a major publishing institution. In 1975, it celebrated its first mention of itself, having overtaken, during 1974, the total sale of Dr. Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care*, as the world's commercial best seller. Somewhere in the heady regions above 25,000,000 copies have been sold, an achievement largely based on the amazing polymathic memories of the McWhirter twins.

On the day after Ross McWhirter's death, the London *Evening Standard* conducted a street poll on whether the death penalty should be reintroduced for crimes or murder in the furtherance of political terrorism. Not altogether unexpectedly, many of those approached gave it as their opinion that the McWhirter outrage had convinced them of the need for this measure.

But before the results of the poll could be printed, a difficulty had arisen. Throughout the morning, many of those who had been interviewed earlier telephoned to say that, on sober reflection, they did not want their names, addresses or photographs to appear beside the opinion they had perhaps rashly expressed on this very complicated issue where many views could reasonably be held in good faith. By the time the *Evening Standard* went to press, so many people had telephoned that the entire poll had to be canceled. This wretched exhibition of cowardice makes a particularly sad epitaph for a man whose outspokenness cost him his life, but I am afraid it is more typical of the British spirit today than McWhirter was. Not many British enterprises, after all, have quite the same success story to tell as the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

European statesmen have been able to take their minds off troubles at home by attending a series of world conferences in which nobody takes the slightest interest, whether they are at the Château de Rambouillet outside Paris or the Palazzo Barberini in Rome. To keep the natives happy, Harold Wilson has instituted a grand red-herring debate on home rule for Scotland and Wales, while declaring another cod war against Iceland.

Iceland, I should explain, is an island close to the Arctic Circle, with a population of 213,000, no army, and no navy apart from six gunboats. These cod wars are a traditional diversion of British politicians when things get sticky at home, and nearly everyone is aware that things have seldom been stickier. Local government spending increases at the rate of at least twenty percent every eighteen months and the expenditure of most government departments is now running out of control, with the important exception of defense. True to its socialist principles, Mr. Wilson's government has actually reduced defense expenditure and plans to reduce it still further. It is this consideration that adds an element of risk to the new development.

The first great cod war started in 1952, when Iceland unilaterally extended its fishing limits from three to four miles. This ended in 1956 with victory for Iceland. The second cod war started in 1958, when they extended their limits from four to twelve miles. This ended in 1961 with victory for Iceland. When, in 1971, a new Icelandic government extended its fishing limits to fifty miles, the British government really started rattling its sabers and sent frigates to teach these frigid midgets a lesson, with the result that this new fifty-mile limit was not recognized until 1973.

No wonder the Icelanders paused for a full two years before taking on once again the armed might of Great Britain (population, 55,900,000; naval strength, 118 combat vessels between frigate and aircraft carrier). This time they have increased their claims to two hundred miles around the coast of Iceland.

Which is all very well, but Reykjavík is only slightly more than a thousand miles from London. If things go on as they are, it plainly won't be very long before these frigid midgets are paddling down the Thames in their kayaks to lay claim to all of the tiddlers in the Pool of London.

I am sure the U.S. ought to draw some sort of moral from this. ###

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(Continued from page 97) it finally disintegrated. She now knows that "Bozo" Miller once ate 324 ravioli at a sitting and that 436 people were consumed by a man-eating tigress in the Champawat district of India. It has given her a fair appreciation of the limitless vistas of Human Absurdity and Natural Disaster. The next thing she read was *Jaws*. Her girl friends were passing it around. How did you like it? "Dumb-oh," she replied. "People will read *anything*." She expressed neither disgust nor surprise, but rather a calm resignation. She will turn out okay.

Maybe you don't want your kid to be "bookish," a member of the literati, intelligentsia, or (God forbid) the cognoscenti, but you would like him to appreciate style. All right. Why not? But how do you go about it? It is my profound conviction that those who are capable of appreciating quality in literature learn it primarily from an initial extended immersion in swill. The reason is simple. Creative-writing teachers never tell you *what* to do in order to write good. They don't know. They tell you what *not* to do. And the best way to learn all the varieties of irritating, awkward, sophomoric and revolting things that you should *not* do is to read, at around age eleven or so, the collected works of Zane Grey or the complete peregrinations of Nancy Drew.

I know what I'm talking about. The first great event in my burgeoning literary awareness came at the age of twelve when I was grimacing my way through the last books of the Hardy Boys series. I had begun them with a genuine puerile interest, but by the time I got to the last three or four I was sick of the crap. A brand-new feeling. I finished them all, though—down to the last preposterous coincidence, the last heartfelt thanks, the last just retribution. But I knew that I had had enough.

Then I heard of something called good writing. I was ready for it. Where was it? Not anywhere around the house. All we had was the *Reader's Digest*, a supermarket encyclopedia, and *The National Wholesale Welding Supply Dealer's Monthly*.

This seems to suggest to me that want, rather than surfeit, is the best goad to childhood literary exploration. A little mild adversity won't hurt, either. I did a great deal of my early reading in bed, under the covers with a flashlight, in an attempt to elude my mother, who had some vague notion that too much reading would make me turn out malproportioned.

Anyway, the next thing I read was, as I remember, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Got it out of the library. Somebody had said it was good writing. I don't remember who. Anyway, I read it.

Talk about your peaks in Darien! Flames came out of my socks and I shot into the air! ###